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VIETNAMESE FEAR A TRIBAL UPRISING

Loyalty of Mountain People to Saigon Regime Fades as Their Discontent Grows

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SAIGON, April 12 — South Vietnam's "other political problem" — the growing discontent of its mountain tribesmen — may soon erupt into a full-scale revolt, qualified sources said today.

The military Government is enmeshed in a major struggle for existence against Buddhist and student enemies in the cities and heavily populated lowland areas.

This adds to the gravity of the often-forgotten montagnard problem, but the informants said the problem had begun to grow grave even before the current political crisis in the cities started March 10.

Montagnard is a collective name for several tribes of non-Vietnamese hill tribesmen who dwell in the nation's mountains and on the high plateau. They have been known by their French names from the days when France ruled Indochina as a colony.

Although they number only about 700,000, montagnards constitute a majority in a land area covering two-thirds of South Vietnam.

Many South Vietnamese de-

scribe the montagnards as "savages" and tend to patronize, despise or exploit them. In turn, montagnard leaders have lost almost all loyalty to Saigon and seem to seek either independence or an autonomous government within a government.

The South Vietnamese Government is deeply suspicious of the United States on this issue. It believes the United States is too sympathetic to the montagnards and has encouraged them in their aspirations.

Maj. Gen. Vinh Loc, the commander of the II Corps area, which embraces most of the Central Highlands, recently asked the United States to close all its Special Forces camps in the area, an informed source said. The general "apparently wants to break up and disarm" the montagnard military units that man the outposts of the special antiguerrilla forces, informants said.

U.S. Likely to Refuse

The United States is likely to resist the general's demands strongly since compliance would cripple the major Special Forces effort in Vietnam.

Some informed sources said that a Montagnard organization called the Unified Front for the Struggle of the Oppressed Races might stage a new revolt soon.

Montagnard support for the front has increased sharply in recent weeks, according to these sources. Supporters of the organization did stage an abortive revolt Dec. 18 in five scattered Highland locations, briefly capturing two provincial capitals and murdering 37 South Vietnamese officials and soldiers in one of them.

The United States Government itself is split on the Montagnard problem, the informants said.

Almost all American officials believe the South Vietnamese should offer the Montagnards better treatment and concessions. But there is disagreement on how hard to press the Saigon Government on this subject.

This is the tangled narrative of events that have led to a worsening of the situation, as

gleaned from a number of sources.

Last September, the South Vietnamese Government moved to disarm several Montagnard Civilian Irregular Defense Group units in American Special Forces camps and capture several hundred Unified Front troops.

U.S. Agents Accused

Americans were excluded from the planning of this move because of a South Vietnamese charge that some members of a United States intelligence agency had encouraged the Unified Front and given it "advice on how to negotiate." Some American officials were removed from their posts in the Highlands on South Vietnamese demand.

However, the South Vietnamese continued to negotiate at the mountain town of Banmethuot with 10 representatives of the Unified Front leader, Y-Bham Enoul, who is believed to be in exile in Cambodia.

On Oct. 22, against American advice, the Saigon Government broke off the negotiations with the argument that it was necessary to "get tough" and show strength before the talks could yield any fruit.

Within a few weeks the Dec. 13 revolt took place. At this time several members of the governing directory of generals strongly criticized General Loc for "blundering." The leading critics were Deputy Premier, Lieut. Gen. Nguyen Huu Co, and the former I Corps commander, Lieut. Gen. Nguyen Chanh Thi. But General Co also favored a "strong" line.

Meanwhile, General Co called on the United States military commander in South Vietnam, Gen. William C. Westmoreland, and asked for advice on how to handle the Unified Front and the montagnard problem as a whole.

The United States mission prepared a memorandum of suggestions, and Philip Habib, the embassy's political counselor, presented it to General Co.

It urged that the Saigon Government act fast to implement earlier promises to improve montagnard education, social welfare and equality in military and Civil Service jobs, to remove barriers that prevented the tribesmen from owning land and to restore their old tribal courts.

General Co privately asked Mr. Habib to intercede with Premier Nguyen Cao Ky to have

montagnard affairs turned over to General Co, who was already Minister of Defense and National Reconstruction. The United States declined.

The State Department, which had been following the problem closely, asked Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge to take a strong stand with the Saigon Government, urging it to meet legitimate montagnard aspirations.

The department said Mr. Lodge should point out that the United States had a direct interest because large numbers of American combat troops were stationed in the Central Highlands and that montagnard disaffection was causing military security to decline.

Mr. Lodge, informed sources said, refused to accept these instructions and told Washington that United States-South Vietnamese relations on the

montagnard question were already so strained that a strong approach would only complicate his problems.

However, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, on visiting Saigon in January, had a special 20-minute chat with Premier Ky in which Mr. Rusk himself carried out his original instructions to Mr. Lodge. Premier Ky and other South Vietnamese officials were again pressed on the subject by Americans at the Honolulu conference early in February.

In February, Premier Ky was persuaded to send an order to General Loc transferring him from the II Corps command, where he dominated handling of the problem, to the post of Minister of Psychological Warfare. The general, a member of the ruling directory, refused the transfer.